




CHOOSING JUDA ISM

Today in Israel, there are voices in society demanding that *geirut* (conversion) be viewed as a tool for social integration. This is most unfortunate since *geirut* is a serious religious act. Indeed, *Chazal* describe the *ger* (convert) as a newborn, leaving his former self behind. A most difficult transformation indeed!

We have previously had occasion to discuss the technical requirements of *geirut* (winter 2003). In the pages ahead, we present the life stories of converts from different nationalities, cultures and backgrounds who found their spiritual home in Judaism. We hope that the lives of these extraordinary individuals, all of whom demonstrate the true meaning of genuine *geirut*, will serve as a profound source of inspiration to all of our readers.

BY YITTA HALBERSTAM

It's said that the "truth will set you free," but when an intrepid Israeli reporter browbeat Dr. Daniel Brown* into going public five years ago, the aftermath was traumatic. "I had always been open about my identity with both my family and friends," he recalls, "and no one had ever been less than supportive and warm. But this particular Israeli newspaper misrepresented its agenda to me. I didn't know that it intended to publicize or sensationalize my interview the way it ultimately did. The story was printed in the weekend edition of the paper, and all day long on Thursday and *erev Shabbat* radio commercials continually blasted every fifteen minutes: *Hitler's nephew's grandson—right here in Israel—and a Jew!* The repercussions left my family shaken."



LIGHT IN ALL THE DARK PLACES

Brown's sons—enrolled in a Modern Orthodox yeshivah in Jerusalem—were spat upon by several of their classmates and called “Nazis.” A handful of neighbors studiously avoided Brown when they encountered him on the street. And in shul the Shabbat after the story aired, a number of social acquaintances who normally greeted him with hearty handshakes turned the other way. “To these people, who had known me as Jewish for twenty-five years, I had become—overnight—a pariah,” says Brown. “I thought I was sharing a valuable lesson with others: that the past *can* be recreated and that a person always has the opportunity to change. But actually, it was *I* who was taught the lesson: Some people will *never* let you change.” (Not surprisingly Brown wanted to use a pseudonym in this article.)

Still, the incident becoming a litmus test for the varieties of human behavior, the responses were *not* uniformly negative. “In the same shul that Shabbat, I was also the recipient of a clearly symbolic act of acceptance,” says Brown. “I was given the first *aliyah*. This told me in no uncertain terms that the majority of the shul members regarded me as a full Jew and an accepted member of the community. Sadly, however, the decency of the majority didn't nullify the crude conduct of the minority. We were badly wounded by what happened.

“Now I understand why most of my counterparts hide their identities,” says Brown. “Many Israelis are uneasy about our genealogy; they don't know how to react or what to do with us.”

Perhaps that is why in a country still scarred by the Shoah, a country

whose very existence still trembles on the foundations of the ash and bone of the Six Million, very few people are aware of what I like to call “The Penance Movement”: a subculture of hundreds of children of Nazis who have embraced their own dark past in the most extreme possible way. They have not only aligned themselves with the group of people their parents sought to annihilate, they have cast off their former identities and themselves become members of that very group. The majority of them have converted halachically, live as Orthodox Jews and reside in Israel. This, I believe, is one of the last great, untold chapters of the post-Holocaust era. It's a story that speaks to humanity's quest for meaning in life, our capacity for goodness and our potential to reshape identity and destiny. Yet, when I contact government officials, rabbinic courts and Israeli journalists themselves asking about this phenomenon, most seem shocked by my inquiries. “Are you *sure*?” they ask, some surprised, others skeptical. “It's an urban legend,” many insist. “How could it be that children of Nazis live right here in Israel and no one knows about them? Impossible!”¹

Interestingly, a disproportionate number of the German converts are distinguished academicians—most notably, in the field of Jewish studies. Brown has followed this trajectory himself and chairs the Jewish studies department at one of the country's leading universities. In his engagement with rabbinic and Talmudic literature, Brown is joined by Rabbi Dr. Aharon Shear-Yashuv (formerly known as Wolfgang Shmidt and one of the few converts who grants me permission to use his real name), chairman of Jewish studies at Bar-Ilan University, and many others including the chairman of the Jewish studies department at a Southern university in the United States and a professor of rabbinic literature at an Ivy League college in the United States. But it is clearly Brown who possesses the most interesting antecedents of all.

“My grandmother's name was

Erna Patra Hitler,” says Brown. (After the War, she dropped the “t,” changing her name to ‘Hiler.’) “Hans Hitler—her second husband—was the Fuhrer's nephew, but he didn't resemble him in any discernible way. He was soft and gentle. But what my step-grandfather lacked in vitriol was more than made up by the fierceness of my grandmother who was a sworn Nazi. She believed in the Nazi ideology before, during and even *after* the War. She was proud that her father-in-law was Hitler's brother, although he kept away from politics. Instead, he managed a café in Berlin, and because everyone knew that he was the Fuhrer's brother, all the Nazi elite patronized his establishment. This made his family and him—including my grandparents—local ‘nobility.’

“When [my grandparents] visited us, they arrived in a black Mercedes, which was then a novelty and status symbol. It was a big deal when the Mercedes arrived in the working-class neighborhood where my mother and I lived.”

Brown was born in Frankfurt in 1952 to Protestant parents who had both served in the Wehrmacht. His father, an ardent supporter of the Nazi party, divorced his mother shortly after his birth, and promptly disappeared from their lives. Brown was raised by his mother, who scrambled to make a living in post-War Germany. She received neither financial nor moral support from Erna Hitler, whom Brown describes as “indifferent to the pain and suffering of others.” Brown's childhood years were marked by deprivation and hardship, as his debt-ridden mother struggled to keep them afloat. They were constantly on the go, moving from one apartment to another, leaving when frustrated landlords forced them out for lack of payment. Still, in one respect that would have profound reverberations for his future, Brown was fortunate. His mother always told him the truth.

Today, there are Germans who complain that they are “sick and tired” of the “endless talk” about the

*Name has been changed.

Yitta Halberstam is the author and co-author of eight books, including the best-selling Small Miracles series (Cincinnati, 1997-2003) and Holy Brother: Inspiring Stories and Enchanted Tales about Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (New Jersey, 2002). Her most recent book is the anthology Changing Course: Women's Inspiring Stories of Menopause, Midlife, and Moving Forward (Cincinnati, 2004).

Holocaust, but in the immediate years after the War, there was only silence and denial, explains Brown. “In school, history teachers taught German history only up until World War I, in accordance with governmental legislation,” he says. “The government was afraid that if these teachers had a Nazi past or had been supporters of Hitler’s regime, they would not be objective in the classroom. So, actually, this law was borne of good intentions. But as a result, we remained largely ignorant about what had happened only a few years before. I remember having conversations with classmates who refused to believe in Germany’s accountability. Their parents had glossed over the details or lied outright. But my own mother hadn’t.”

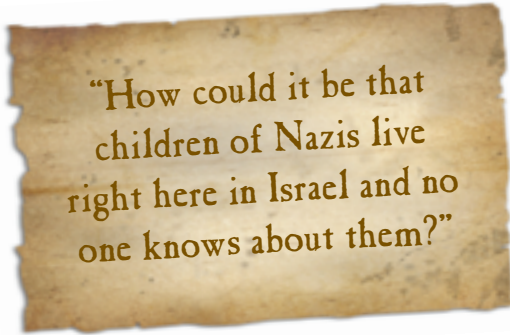
Instead of the elaborate fabrications concocted by his friends’ parents to conceal the truth, Brown’s mother showed her son her cache of documents (which bore seals of the Reich with accompanying swastikas), letters and photographs of family members—including herself—wearing Wehrmacht uniforms, which testified to their complicity. She told him that she had been stationed in the Polish city of Lodz, where they hung Jews in the center of the city. “It was awful,” his mother told him. “I needed to pass through the center of town everyday in order to get from my house to headquarters and back. But I couldn’t bear to see the Jews strung up like that, so I took a long detour around the city each day to avoid this terrible scene. I never got used to it.”

Brown was horrified by his mother’s account. He felt the room go black as he rifled through the physical evidence of her past, but his mother’s genuine remorse provided him with some small measure of comfort. “When I asked her why she kept following orders, why she didn’t resist, she answered simply, but with deep shame, ‘I was afraid.’ I believed her,” says Brown.

Although Brown tried to share his mother’s revelations with his school

friends, they couldn’t accept them as true; they told him that he was making it up. “So I tried to block it from my mind,” says Brown.

But when he was a high school student his destiny came calling again by way of an inheritance from his biological grandfather—his grandmother’s first husband—who had willed him a carton of books, among them his personal copy of *Mein Kampf*. “I had never seen Hitler’s infamous book before, and I read it thoroughly,” says Brown. “I was



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absolutely enraged by what he wrote. I kept on writing comments in the book’s margins, comments that countered Hitler’s claims. I still have this book in my library, because it served as a major catalyst in my life. I couldn’t remain apathetic to what I read. I know my encounter with it shaped my future to a large extent.”

The future of every young German in the post-War period included a mandatory stint in the army, but largely as a result of his encounter with the Holocaust, Brown had become a pacifist. “I was expected to join the army as soon as I graduated [from] high school, so I cast about for ways to get out of this civil obligation,” he says. “I learned that the two groups that were exempt from military service were the clergy and students of the Catholic Church. So when I opted to become a theology student, it was originally out of opportunism, not spiritual concerns. But way leads on to way, and that’s precisely what happened to me.

“Theology students are required to take several courses in Judaism and Hebrew, and I became increasingly fascinated by what I was learning,” says

Brown. “While studying Judaism, I saw more and more things that troubled me about Christianity. For example, the concept of the Holy Trinity bothered me a lot ... how [could] God be three? Another thing that I didn’t understand was the idea that a Christian has to suffer in order to be redeemed. The Jewish approach manifested by Yom Kippur made much more sense to me.

“The vast theological differences between Judaism and Christianity created a schism inside myself, and I was beginning to feel schizophrenic,” Brown continues. “In 1977, I decided to go to Israel to further my studies at Hebrew University where I ... took classes in Hebrew literature and Jewish philosophy. I fell in love with Israel and lengthened my stay from one year to two.” Ultimately, Brown ended up studying at Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav.

Brown makes short shrift of my “Penance Movement” hypothesis—that children of Nazis convert to Judaism as atonement—maintaining that he converted for theological reasons, not out of penance for his parents’ sins. “Maybe there are unconscious psychological reasons that drove me to Judaism,” he allows, “but since I am a critical thinker and very cerebral, on a conscious level at least, I believe that I came to Judaism from a place of pure intellect.” He does, however, concede this: “I believe that whoever is willing to take this step [conversion] must have a very deep identity crisis preceding the conversion itself. He’s not able to return to the identity that he was born into. I understood that I was not happy in the place where I was born, and I made a decision to go to another place.

“The fact is that during the seventies and eighties many young Germans who wanted to detach themselves from the previous generation, the generation that was complicit in the Holocaust, left Germany. And the percentage of German converts in Israel is not insignificant. I converted mainly because I had a theological criticism of Christianity. Is this a rationalization I gave myself? My grandfather didn’t have

any educational or cultural influence over me, but it still makes me feel awful that this is the background I come from. It sharpens the identity questions that I am so busy with.... My identity is not taken for granted. It is something that I must continually deal with.”

Brown converted to Judaism in 1979, and married another German convert who is also an academician. Although his wife’s parents in Stuttgart cut off all contact with their daughter, his own mother (who died seven years ago) accepted him as a Jew and visited him several times at his home in Israel. “Perhaps she was afraid that if she didn’t accept my conversion, she would lose her only child,” says Brown. “Whatever the reason, she dealt well with my Jewishness. She attended my three sons’ Bar Mitzvahs and participated in our Pesach Sedarim. I once even suggested that she come live with us in Jerusalem and not remain alone in Germany, but she said, ‘You don’t plant an old tree in a new place.’ But up until her death, we remained very connected.”

Brown is strictly halachic, identifying with Centrist Orthodoxy. Still, as a German convert, there are a few areas that give him pause, such as participating in Yom HaShoah ceremonies; emotionally it is too turbulent for him. “I usually stay home.”

Brown and his wife have worked hard to create a home that is warm, loving and supportive. “I wanted to make sure that my children have a path, a direction, a value system, not the muddled and complex dysfunction I myself experienced as a child,” he says. “But as much as I’ve tried to protect them from their schizophrenic legacy, there are things I can’t control. For example, when my son Yisrael traveled to Poland with his school several years ago, his reaction was completely different from his classmates. ‘Everything felt weird,’ he told me. ‘I stood in the camps and thought about how the grandfathers of all of my friends had been *inside*, while *my* grandfather had been *outside*. My classmates came to those camps with their pasts; I just came to watch. I was

caught in the middle—it felt screwed up.’

“I also feel utterly helpless when my sons’ classmates say mean and hurtful things to them—comments which have accelerated since the interview in the Israeli newspaper was first published,” Brown says. “Last year, for example, during a ceremony on Yom Hazikaron, several students whispered to my youngest son that they were going to beat him up because he’s a Nazi. I refused to send him to school

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for a week until the principal took care of the problem.”

Brown has had his share of ugly run-ins himself. “I have always tried to be open and honest about my roots; I have never hidden my background like many converts from Nazi backgrounds,” he says. “Most of the time, people are accepting and tolerant. Once in a while, though, someone will say something offensive. Recently, after sharing some biographical details with my university students, one of them told me: ‘Imagine! Your grandfather might have turned *my* grandmother into soap.’”

Brown guesstimates that there are approximately three hundred German converts in Israel, but most are averse to publicity and remain relentlessly reclusive. Still, as the Holocaust recedes into history, an increasing number of these converts are coming forward with their stories. Recent newspaper articles published in both Europe and Canada have detailed the extraordinary metamorphoses of people like Matthias Goering, great-nephew of the notorious Luftwaffe Chief Hermann Goering, who keeps kosher, celebrates Shabbat and wears a yarmulka; Katrin Himmler, great-niece

of SS Commander Heinrich Himmler, who married an Israeli and Oskar Eder, a former member of the Luftwaffe who changed his name to Asher, married a Holocaust survivor and currently works in Israel as a tour guide. The astonishing trajectories of these personalities, and people very much like them, demonstrate for Brown the powerful message that “nothing is immutable. The meaning of my story, of my counterparts’ stories, is that things *can* be changed: You can change your behavior, your location, your faith. Being and becoming is what we are doing every day.” **IA**

Note

1. Interestingly, it is in Germany where there is some heightened awareness of the subject due to the occasional article that has appeared in mass-circulation magazines such as *Stern* and *Der Spiegel*, and to the publication of a few books in German. These books include Rabbi Dr. Aharon Shear-Yashuv’s autobiography and an anthology by Antje Eiger entitled *Ich bin Judein Geworden: Begegnungen mit Deutschen Konvertiten* (*I Became a Jew: Interviews with German Converts*) (Hamburg, 1994), in which a caustic essay by Henryk Broder, “Zum Teufel mit den Konvertiten” (“To the Devil with the Converts”), scathingly denounces the German converts as opportunists who wish to “attach themselves to the right side of the victims.”

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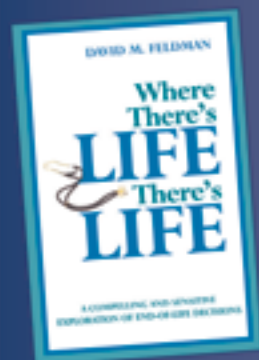
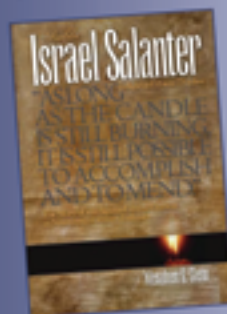


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